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Spirit of San Domingo lives on: Residents reclaiming American Indian heritage

By Brian Feagans
 Staff Writer
 August 26, 2001
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SAN DOMINGO |

San Domingo isn't found on any map. Those who are from there just know it, the way they know their veins course with American Indian blood.

What binds them together is a feeling of being the "other" people whose families live or have lived along the flat farmland where the headwaters of the Waccamaw River meet the sandy flanks of the Cape Fear in southern Bladen County.

They don't identify with white society. And many don't feel a part of the African-American community that dominates East Arcadia, the nearest town. Even the Waccamaw Siouan, a Native American tribe based less than 10 miles away in Bolton, won't accept them.

"It's almost like we're the Cinderellas of the area, the unwanted stepchildren," said Winnie Webb Lloyd, a Delco resident whose mother was from San Domingo. "There were times when I cried about it."

Now, in an attempt to nurture their Native American roots before they're forgotten, Mrs. Lloyd and three dozen other people with ties to San Domingo have joined the Chicora-Waccamaw tribe of Conway, S.C. Once a month, they make the three-hour round trip to the tribe's bingo hall on U.S. 701 to celebrate their heritage.



Minnie Pearl Blanks is an American Indian who lives in a small trailer in San Domingo, a small, rural community in southern Bladen County. Ms. Blanks is one of several people in the community who has joined the Chicora-Waccamaw tribe in South Carolina. *Staff Photo by Mark Courtney*



A smoking cauldron of sage, tobacco and sweetgrass filled the cavernous building with an herbal haze at the beginning of one recent tribal meeting. Nailed to the white plaster walls were a buffalo hide, a bobcat skin and several Native American flags. "You must yell Bingo," read cardboard signs duct-taped in-between.

After an eagle feather passed over their bodies to cleanse the soul, more than 50 tribal members locked hands in a circle and prayed for the "two-leggeds of the world, the four-leggeds of the world and those that fly in the air."

The all-embracing message was fitting for a tribe that has opened its arms to the people of San Domingo.

Chief Harold Hatcher said that while other tribes may require applicants to have recent social ties to existing members, the Chicora-Waccamaw only needs proof of Waccamaw blood.

"Any way you slice it, there's no way you can't be kin," Chief Hatcher said. "The Waccamaw, they lived up and down the river from Bolton to Winyah Bay. It's more important to us that our family can be family."

Fading away

Once a tight-knit community closed to the outside world, San Domingo has released its people like seeds from a pod. Only a few dozen descendants still live here. Their children and grandchildren have moved to neighboring counties, South Carolina and as far away as the Northeast.

Meanwhile, black and white families have moved into the community, where one-story homes and expansive lawns blend in with the rest of rural Bladen County.

The tribal meetings and powwows of the Chicora-Waccamaw are good sign for Rufus Graham, who spent part of his childhood in San Domingo. The 30-year-old has come back to the area to help heal what he calls a "broken spirit."

A few traditions have survived, such as herbal medicine, trapping game and making patchwork quilts. But until now, few residents have really celebrated their heritage.

Mr. Graham has mined the community's past in hopes of salvaging its future. He has pored through U.S. Census records, land deeds and family heirlooms, turning up such gems as a 19th-century Bible with a complete family tree sketched in the opening pages.

"I want to document it because I'm the younger generation," he said. "If I didn't push it, you'd just hear hearsay about how dangerous it was or how beautiful the women were. It's a shame to have such a distinct people and people not know about it."

Murky history

San Domingo's origins are hard to pin down.

Some residents believe they are the descendants of Cherokee and Tuscarora ancestors who moved into Bladen County from other parts of the state. Others

believe they're related to the Waccamaw Indians who settled and cultivated the alligator-infested fringes of the Green Swamp that white farmers wouldn't touch. They also could be an amalgam of these groups or descendants of the mysterious Cape Fear Indians who were pushed into the swamps when Europeans settled the coast.

Whatever the original tribe, Mr. Graham believes San Domingo has its roots in the Indian Wells settlement on the Cape Fear River. It sits across N.C. 87 from the community, next to an old ferry landing upstream from where Lock and Dam No. 1 is today.

State archaeologists, intrigued by references to Indian Wells on maps from the 1800s, took a cursory look at the site last year. Road remnants, artesian wells and oak trees pointed to a settlement of some kind, said John Mintz, an archaeologist with the State Office of Archaeology. But the site was too thick with vegetation for a thorough investigation, and the state couldn't confirm it was an Indian community, he said.

"A lot of pieces are starting to fit the puzzle, but archaeologically we don't have overwhelming evidence yet," he said.

Mr. Graham has found documentation that John Blanks, an ancestor of Native Americans who live in San Domingo today, was well established in Bladen County by the 1700s.

Josiah Martin, the King of England's captain general and governor-in-chief, granted Mr. Blanks 100 acres in the San Domingo area in a land deed dated Feb. 13, 1773.

The first U.S. Census, taken in 1790, lists Mr. Blanks as a "free person." The term covered freed slaves and mulattos in addition to Native Americans. But later generations of Blankses listed themselves as Indians when that became an option on the Census a century later. So did Lacewells and Grahams, names that run down the sides of mailboxes here today.

Minnie Pearl Blanks, a direct descendant of John Blanks, lives on part of that original 100 acres today. She catches blackbirds with worm-baited nails, shoots deer and keeps a backyard garden of collards and onions.

A blackbird feather and corncob hang from the front of her trailer.

"It's good luck for the harvest," she said.

Ms. Blanks doesn't remember who taught her about the good-luck charm. She's just always done it.

Holding on

Willie Ree Rogers, 77, grew up in San Domingo when it was still relatively isolated from the surrounding world.

The land was covered with grapevines, fig trees and pear groves, she said. Row crops such as collards and corn also allowed the community to be largely self-sufficient.

San Domingo was famously hostile to outsiders, Mrs. Rogers said, particularly young men who came courting its women.

To keep the bloodline strong, parents urged their children to marry within the community, even wed a cousin if that's what it took.

The isolation began to wane, however, as more people sought work outside the community. Men labored at nearby lumber mills or at the fertilizer plants closer to Wilmington, Mrs. Rogers said.

Pretty soon, entire families moved out, and there was little incentive to embrace their heritage. Being Indian had long been taboo in a society that passed the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

The experience is similar to that of more than a dozen other enclaves of American Indians scattered around North Carolina, according to Forest Hazel, an ethnohistorian who has studied such groups in the Piedmont.

Most centered on farming and remained insulated until the latter part of the 20th century, said Mr. Hazel, who is in charge of getting federal recognition for the Occaneechi tribe of Alamance and Orange counties.

School desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s spawned a greater tendency to marry across racial lines, he said. And an increasingly urbanized society pulled many residents to cities for jobs.

"A lot of these communities have just disintegrated completely," Mr. Hazel said.

For many people who moved out of largely American Indian communities, it was easier to identify as black or white.

Delilah Blanks, who is half Indian, has become a leader in the African-American community.

Ms. Blanks, a Bladen County commissioner, said she's always known her roots were in San Domingo. She had two American Indian grandparents, one black grandparent and one white grandparent.

But all forces were steering her toward the black community, she said.

"You had some activist movements fighting for your rights," she said. "The Indians didn't have any movements."

The recent push to celebrate the area's Native American heritage hasn't struck a chord with her.

"Some have been turned on, some have been turned off," she said, "and some just don't care too much about it."

Belong

Back at the Chicora-Waccamaw meeting house in Conway, Mrs. Rogers took the oath to protect "seven generations yet unborn" as she was sworn in as a member of the tribe's Council of Elders.

She became the second person from San Domingo to sit on the council.

The tribal meetings have been like going home, especially for the older residents of San Domingo who haven't been involved with anything that reflected their heritage.

"I guess you could say they were homeless culturally," said Mrs. Lloyd, 56.

Some of the new members have found their families share traditions that they never knew were Native American in origin, Chief Hatcher said. They decorate gravesites with seashells and cedar posts, give elders vegetable baskets and build earthen banks to store their crops during the winter.

"It's like the sparrow in the United States and the sparrows in England," he said. "They tend to build their nests the same."

The meeting had been productive. After some debate, the Council of Elders voted to make scholarship applications available to non-Native Americans, but only under a point system that gave preference to members and their families. They agreed to buy a teepee from a man in South Dakota. And the tribe cheered a member who volunteers as a chauffeur for disabled veterans.

As the session came to a close, the group gathered in a circle once again and prayed. Here, they were not the "other" people. They belonged.

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LINEAGE CHART

16 Alfred Blanks
B-1774
B-1868
Indian Wells
B-1750 John Bl

4 Dougald Blanks, Sr.
BORN 10-15-1881
WHERE Indian Wells, Bladen Co. NC
WHEN MARRIED
DIED 10-15-1919
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

2 Dougald Blanks, Jr.
BORN 6-2-1916
WHERE Indian Wells, Bladen Co. NC
WHEN MARRIED
DIED 11-4-1974
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

5 Lois Graham
BORN
WHERE Bladen Co. NC
DIED 12-30-1969
WHERE Brunswick Co. NC

6 Rufus Graham
BORN 7-19-1897
WHERE Bladen Co. NC
WHEN MARRIED
DIED 10-11-1966
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

7 Rhesset Lacerell
BORN 9-18-1900
WHERE Indian Wells, Bladen Co. NC
DIED 5-14-1975
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

3 Jessie Lee Graham
BORN 6-11-1922
WHERE Bladen Co. NC
DIED 4-3-1983
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

11 John F. Graham
BORN 12-7-1857
WHERE Bladen Co. NC
WHEN MARRIED
DIED 10-24-1931
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

12 George Heath Graham
BORN 2-10-1852
WHERE Bladen Co. NC
WHEN MARRIED
DIED 1-29-1909
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

13 Rhoda Ann Blanks
BORN 1871/1872
WHERE Bladen Co. Indian Wells
DIED 1910
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

8 Mikel Blanks
BORN 1805
WHERE Bladen Co. NC
WHEN MARRIED
DIED 1912
WHERE East Arcadia, NC

9 Mary Catherine Lambert
BORN 1841
WHERE
DIED 191-
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

10 John F. Graham
BORN 12-7-1857
WHERE Bladen Co. NC
WHEN MARRIED
DIED 10-24-1931
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

11 Melvina Graham
BORN
WHERE
DIED
WHERE

12 George Heath Graham
BORN 2-10-1852
WHERE Bladen Co. NC
WHEN MARRIED
DIED 1-29-1909
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

13 Rhoda Ann Blanks
BORN 1871/1872
WHERE Bladen Co. Indian Wells
DIED 1910
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

14 Andrews Lacerell
BORN 1835, November
WHERE Indian Wells, Bladen Co. NC
DIED 1913
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

15 Isabelle Daniel
BORN 1857
WHERE Bladen Co. NC
DIED 1928, 6-20-1928
WHERE Bladen Co. NC

17 Richard Lambert
ABOVE NAME CONTINUED ON CHART

18 James Graham
B-1814
B-1840
ABOVE NAME CONTINUED ON CHART

19 Minnie Blanks
B-5-20-1844
B-10-7-1913
ABOVE NAME CONTINUED ON CHART

20 James Graham
B-1814
B-1840
ABOVE NAME CONTINUED ON CHART

21 Minnie Blanks
B-5-20-1844
B-10-7-1913
ABOVE NAME CONTINUED ON CHART

22 James Graham
B-1814
B-1840
ABOVE NAME CONTINUED ON CHART

23 Minnie Blanks
B-5-20-1844
B-10-7-1913
ABOVE NAME CONTINUED ON CHART

24 James Graham
B-1814
B-1840
ABOVE NAME CONTINUED ON CHART

25 Minnie Blanks
B-5-20-1844
B-10-7-1913
ABOVE NAME CONTINUED ON CHART

26 Alfred Blanks
B-1774
B-1868
Indian Wells
B-1750 John Bl

27 William
B-1800
B-1802
B-1774 Alfred B

28 Sarah
B-1802
B-1774 Alfred B

29 William
B-1800
B-1802
B-1774 Alfred B

30 Sarah
B-1802
B-1774 Alfred B

31 Alfred
B-1774
B-1868
Indian Wells
B-1750 John Bl

32 William
B-1800
B-1802
B-1774 Alfred B

33 Sarah
B-1802
B-1774 Alfred B

34 William
B-1800
B-1802
B-1774 Alfred B

Minnie Pearl Blanks
Living
Bladen Co. NC
MARRIED
HERE

NAME OF HUSBAND OR WIFE